

CONCORDIA SEMINARY

LAW AND GOSPEL IN THE VICARIOUS SATISFACTION OF CHRIST

A STUDY SUBMITTED TO
DR. RICHARD KLANN OF THE DEPARTMENT OF SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT FO THE REQUIREMENTS
OF
S-315. THE CONCEPT OF LAW AND ITS RELATION TO THE GOSPEL

BY
DAVID BOISCLAIR

ST. LOUIS, MISSOURI
24 MAY 1982

I. INTRODUCTION

The doctrine of the vicarious satisfaction of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ—His perfect and sufficient righteousness by which God is reconciled to all people—is the center of our Christian faith. It is the very heart of the Gospel in the narrow sense. As such we as present and future Christian teachers may be a bit reluctant to speak of it in terms of Law as well as Gospel, fearing to confuse the one with the other and, thus, obscure the merit of Christ and rob troubled consciences of their comfort.¹ Both Law and Gospel, however, can be discerned in this doctrine as well as in all the doctrines of our Lord's Person and work. This will be demonstrated in this study.

Before beginning, however, it would be well to point out that the doctrine of our Lord's vicarious satisfaction as well as any other Christian doctrine is correctly taught only by means of the proper distinction between Law and Gospel. Dr. Walther points this out through a testimony of John Gerhard, an orthodox Lutheran dogmatician:

“The distinction between the Law and the Gospel must be maintained at every point.” Mark well—*at every point*. There is not a doctrine that does not call upon us rightly to divide Law and Gospel.²

Dr. Pieper draws attention to the connection between proper Law/Gospel distinction and the vicarious satisfaction when he writes:

It does not surprise us that modern theology would have no use for the distinction between Law and Gospel. That idea is the inevitable result of the denial of the *satisfactio Christi vicaria* [vicarious satisfaction of Christ], which characterizes modern theology. Certainly, if God did not fully reconcile mankind unto Himself through Christ's vicarious satisfaction, if Christ has not, in our stead, fulfilled the requirements of the Law which binds mankind, and suffered its punishment in our stead, it necessarily follows that man must somehow by his own work and his

¹ *Triglot Concordia: The Symbolical Books of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, (St. Louis, Missouri: Concordia Publishing House, 1921), 951.

² C.F.W. Walther, *The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel: Thirty-Nine Evening Lectures*, trans. W.H.T. Dau, (St. Louis, Missouri: Concordia Publishing House, [1929]), 37.

own virtues either effect his reconciliation with God or complete the reconciliation begun by Christ.³

This study will attempt to present the doctrine of our Lord's vicarious satisfaction through the distinction of Law and Gospel. It will also explore the use of Law and Gospel as they appear in the doctrine.

II. THE LAW IN THE VICARIOUS SATISFACTION

Before surveying the three uses of the Law in connection with the vicarious satisfaction, it will be helpful to define the doctrine and discuss its general relation to the Law.

As stated above, the vicarious satisfaction of Christ is the perfect righteousness He rendered to God vicariously—that is, in this case, in place of all people—which completely reconciles God to them (2 Cor. 5:15, 18, 19). It is accomplished by Christ in His active and passive obedience to the Law of God.

In His active obedience Christ places Himself under the Law to perform all of its requirements with respect to both His human nature and actions (Gal. 4:4, 5). The requirement of a perfect nature, which we have not performed since we are “by nature children of wrath” (Eph. 2:3), Christ has performed by being “holy, innocent, undefiled, separated from sinners ...” (Heb. 7:26). The requirement of living a perfect life of holy actions, which we have not performed as Scripture says: “Indeed, there is not a righteous man on earth who continually does good and who never sins” (Eccles. 7:20), Christ has performed by doing “all things well” (Mk. 7:37) and by doing “nothing wrong” (Lk. 23:41).

³ Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, 4 vols., trans. Theodore Engelder et al., (St. Louis, Missouri: Concordia Publishing House, 1950-57), 1:76, 77.

In the life of Christ under the Law we see the perfect image of God as set forth *in* the Law. St Paul writes of Christ in the Letter to the Colossians: "...He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation" (Col. 1:15). In the Second Letter to the Corinthians St Paul again identifies Christ with the image of God:

And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, in whose case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving, that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God (2 Cor. 4:3, 4).

The writer of the Letter to the Hebrews has put it this way: "... He [Christ] is the radiance of His [God's] glory and the exact representation of His nature ..." (Heb. 1:3).

Our Lord's life centered around unquestioned obedience to His Father in accordance with the First Commandment. In His temptation when the devil promised Him all the kingdoms of the world if He would worship him, Christ asserted the First Commandment when He said: "You shall worship the Lord your God and serve Him only" (Mt. 4:10; Lk. 4:8). He demonstrated this unquestioned obedience also when in the Garden of Gethsemane He prayed concerning His imminent suffering and death: "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; yet not as I will, but as Thou wilt (Mt. 26:39).

This leads us to Christ's passive obedience in which He places Himself under the Law to suffer in the place of all people the penalty they have incurred through their violation of the Law. This truth of Scripture is set forth in many clear passages. St Paul writes:

For as many as are of the works of the Law are under a curse; for it is written, "Cursed is every one who does not abide by all things written in the book of the Law, to perform them." ... Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law, having become a curse for us—for it is written, "Cursed is every one who hangs on a tree" ... (Gal. 3:10, 13).

St John writes:

... He Himself is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for those of the whole world (1 Jn. 2:2).

The Law in Christ's vicarious satisfaction sets the requirements to be fulfilled and the penalty to be paid through that vicarious satisfaction. Christ as the Image of God in human flesh displayed an exact picture of the Law and as the Lamb of God displayed the horrible penalty to be paid for disobedience to that Law.

The First Use of the Law

The Law perfectly set forth in the life of Christ curbs the gross outbursts of sin when His outward holy example is followed by the unbeliever. The unbeliever who examines the life of Christ sees a man living His life in perfect conformity to moral law, promoting peace and order in the world. A fitting illustration of this is Christ's payment of the two-drachma temple tax as set forth in Matthew 17:24-27. Although Christ's reason for paying it—that He not “give them [the collectors of this tax] offense” or “cause them to stumble”—runs deeper than a mere outward conformity to the religious/civil law of the time, the unbeliever would see and might follow it only as such. Jesus' action in this case squares with His response to the Pharisees' and Herodians' question about the lawfulness of the poll-tax to Caesar: “... Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's; and to God the things that are God's” (Mt. 22:21).

Fallen man has only a blurred image of the Law of God in his heart; he sees only the outward justice and order in the life of Christ. He recognizes the wisdom of Christ's saying: “... Whatever you want others to do for you, do so for them” (Mt. 7:12), agreeing

to label it the Golden Rule, but he fails to recognize the motivation that Christ Himself had as He obeyed this rule—perfect and absolute love for the true God.

Up to now in this section the first use of the Law in Christ's active obedience has been surveyed. The first use of the Law in His passive obedience would be the outward example of His innocent suffering and death at the hands of the Jews and the Romans. The unbeliever would compare Christ's sufferings and death to the death of Socrates or to the imprisonment and sufferings of Gandhi. He would follow Christ's example as he might follow a worldly crusader for the betterment of mankind's lot, suffering at the hands of a malevolent political system.

Unfortunately for the unbeliever, this is one of the only uses he can make of Christ's Person and work: Merely an example of a good and loving man in a world of hate and injustice. It remains for him to experience the Law in its second use to prepare him to hear the Gospel, by which God enables him to make salutary use of Christ's Person and work.

The Second Use of the Law

The Law exhibited in Christ's active obedience performs its (second) convicting function. Christ provides the only instance of a human being who perfectly obeyed the Law of God. When one compares himself to Christ he sees how far he has fallen "short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23).

This convicting function was operative in Peter after the miraculous catch of fish when he fell down at Jesus' feet, saying: "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord!" (Lk. 5:8). Of course, Peter was not *primarily* convicted of his sinfulness on the

basis of Christ's sinless human nature but because, through the miracle, he realized he was standing before the almighty and holy God.

The Law in our Lord's passive obedience can also convict. It convicts, first of all, by showing God's justice: That He regards it as absolutely necessary that His Law be obeyed—God in His pure justice stands behind every requirement of His Law, ready to judge any offender. The commandments of God's Law are not “human trifles,” writes Dr. Luther in the Large Catechism, “but the commandments of the Divine Majesty, who insists upon them with such earnestness, is angry with, and punishes those who despise them”⁴

The manner in which the justice of God was operative in the vicarious satisfaction of Christ is explained by St Paul in Romans 3:

... [Christ Jesus] God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith. *This was to demonstrate His righteousness*, because in the forbearance of God He passed over the sins previously committed; *for the demonstration, I say, of His righteousness at the present time, that He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus* (Rom. 3:25, 26; emphasis added).

God could not declare all people forgiven by mere fiat; to satisfy His justice, He could only do so after the severe penalty was paid by Christ. In the death of Christ we see God's wrath against our sins completely poured out.

We are also convicted of our sinfulness when we see the cost that Christ paid in His sufferings and death. It is a cost so great that only the sufferings and death of God the Son could pay it.

⁴ Triglot, *The Large Catechism*, “Conclusion of the Ten Commandments,” paragraph 330, p. 677.

The Third Use of the Law

The Law exhibited in Christ's active obedience is presented in its third use—a rule for the lives of believers—in those passages of Scripture which exhort the believer to imitate Christ. Christ Himself does this when He invites His disciples:

“Take My yoke upon you, and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart; and you shall find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy, and My load is light” (Mt. 11:29, 30).

He did it again just before His holy Supper. After He had washed His disciples' feet, He said to them: “... I gave you an example that you also should do as I did to you” (Jn. 13:15). St Paul also exhorts his believing readers to imitate him as he imitates Christ (1 Cor. 4:16; Phil. 3:17; 4:9; and 2 Cor. 11:1).

This imitation of Christ extends as well to His passive obedience. We as believers are always to be ready to suffer for His sake just as He suffered:

And He was saying to them all, “If anyone wishes to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross *daily*, and follow Me. For whoever wishes to save his life shall lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake, he is the one who will save it (Lk. 9:23, 24; emphasis added).

SS Peter and John exhort their believing readers to follow Christ in His sufferings and death. St Peter writes:

... If when you do what is right and suffer for it you patiently endure it, this finds favor with God. For you have been called for this purpose, since Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to follow in His steps, who committed no sin, nor was any deceit found in His mouth ... (1 Pet. 2:20-22).

St John exhorts his believing readers:

We know love by this, that He laid down His life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren (1 Jn. 3:16).

St Paul identifies the believer's sufferings with Christ as an evidence that he is a child of God and an heir of eternal life:

The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, heirs also, heirs of God and fellow-heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him in order that we may also be glorified with Him (Rom. 8:16, 17).

As demonstrated, the Law not only plays a part in Christ's vicarious satisfaction; in the doctrine, it also functions according to its three uses. It functions most markedly according to its second and third uses as is shown from Scripture.

III. THE GOSPEL IN THE VICARIOUS SATISFACTION

Whereas Christ in effecting His vicarious satisfaction exhibits the Law in fulfilling it and suffering the penalty for its infraction by all people, the vicarious satisfaction is itself the kernel of the Gospel. The message of the Gospel consists in this, that God has been reconciled to the world on the basis of Christ's vicarious satisfaction (2 Cor. 5:15-19)—Christ's resurrection was God's act of justifying all people (Rom. 4:23-25). This Gospel then produces faith by which the believer receives the forgiveness of sins: He is justified by faith.

The vicarious satisfaction of Christ offers nothing to the conscience-stricken hearer but the sweetest consolation. Dr. Pieper gives the reason why:

If anything is clear from Scripture, it is this fact, that the redemption of Christ balanced our account with God. It is a complete settlement, complete *extensive* [extensively], for Christ acted for all men; complete *intensive* [intensively], for the wrath of God is totally removed, and God receipted the bill against us by raising Christ from the dead.⁵

⁵ Pieper, *op. cit.*, 2:347.

IV. CONCLUSION: PROPER LAW/GOSPEL DISTINCTION WITH RESPECT TO THE VICARIOUS SATISFACTION

There is both Law and Gospel in Christ's vicarious satisfaction. The Law determined the requirements to be fulfilled by our Lord in accomplishing His vicarious satisfaction. The vicarious satisfaction itself is the kernel or heart of the Gospel, which, in its entirety, is the comforting message of God's reconciling Himself to mankind in Christ.

The Law and the Gospel in the vicarious satisfaction must also be properly distinguished. When it is not, distortions of the Person and work of Christ result. One of these distortions is condemned by Dr. Walther:

The first manner of confounding Law and Gospel is the one most easily recognized—and the grossest. It is adopted, for instance by Papists, Socinians, and Rationalists and consists in this, that Christ is represented as a new Moses, or Lawgiver, and the Gospel turned into a doctrine of meritorious works, while at the same time those who teach that the Gospel is the message of the free grace of God in Christ are condemned and anathematized, as is done by the papists.⁶

Related to this distortion is that which sees Christ merely as a moral example for the Christian to follow. Needless to say, this view rejects the vicarious satisfaction itself by rejecting its vital components: Christ's deity, His active and passive obedience, the necessity of a blood atonement, the demands of God's justice, *et cetera*.

Another distortion that comes from the other end of the spectrum, that of Antinomianism, sees Christ as the end of the Law (Rm. 10:4), in the sense that the Law of God as revealed in the Old Testament is no longer in force, or as the abolisher of the Law (Eph. 2:14, 15: "For He Himself is our peace, who made both groups into one, and broke down the barrier of the dividing wall, by abolishing in His flesh the enmity, which is the Law of commandments contained in ordinances ..."). Those who hold this view do not reckon with the words of Christ:

⁶ Walther, *op. cit.*, 1.

“Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish, but to fulfill. For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass away from the Law, until all is accomplished. Whoever then annuls one of the least of these commandments, and so teaches others, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever keeps and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven” (Mt. 5:17-19).

They also do not reckon with the fact that St Paul speaks of the ceremonial law in the Ephesians passage. The ceremonial law is no longer in force since its purpose—to foreshadow Christ—is no longer necessary.

Ultimately, for there to be a proper Law/Gospel distinction in the doctrine of the vicarious satisfaction of Christ and, hence, a proper picture of Christ, the Law must continue to be seen as the uncompromisable standard of god—the revelation of His very being, necessary to be fulfilled before He can reconcile Himself to fallen mankind—and the Gospel, as the unconditionally certain comforting message of God’s complete reconciliation with fallen mankind. In this way, Christ is seen as the Mediator Who vicariously satisfies the demands of the Law for all people, thereby reconciling God to them.